DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 255 FL 021 806

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TITLE Self-Study Centre: Help, Fun, and Interdependence.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (27th, Atlanta, GA, April 13-17, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Independent Study; *Language Laboratories; Program Effectiveness; Program Implementation; *Second Language Instruction; *Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; Workshops
IDENTIFIERS *Brazil (Rio de Janeiro); *Self Study Centers

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the development and use of student self-study centers in language programs, focusing on the experiences of a language teacher in developing such a center at Cultura Inglesia in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Self-study centers may be defined as a set of facilities aimed at providing students with the opportunity of learning independently. Self-study centers may provide help to students through remedial work and assessment of progress; enjoyable activities and materials such as games, films, magazines; contact with other students; and independence from teacher-controlled activities. A survey of students at the school found that some students did not know what a self-study center was; some were not used to the idea of self-study; and some thought it was only for weak or remedial students. Even some teachers were not aware of the self-study center's purpose and operation. To effectively implement a self-study center, program administrators need to conduct teacher and student workshops to make both groups aware of the existence, purpose, operation, and goals of the center. (MDM)

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# SELF-STUDY CENTRE: HELP, FUN AND INDEPENDENCE

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## INTRODUCTION

If we believe that students should be responsible for their learning, the habit of using the SELF-STUDY CENTRE ought to be a must for the developing of this responsibility. However, this sense of independence is not very easy to acquire and teachers play an important role in this process.

This paper will present results of an action research project on the use of self-study. At first, I thought of summarizing students' perceived difficulties, analyse materials already prepared and give some suggestions of activities which could motivate students to use the centres. However, when I really started the research I found out that students' difficulties were very much related to teachers' difficulties in accepting the idea of self-access learning. Therefore, it would not help much only to analyse materials. I decided, then, to advertise the idea by presenting workshops and posters in which teachers, teacher trainers and school managers could discuss the difficulties when setting up a self-study centre. During these discussions some possible solutions for the problems were suggested. I think it could be worthwhile analysing these suggestions and thinking of the best way of adapting them to our reality. Finally, I would like to summarize how I have been trying to help the development of the idea in my institution.

I hoped that each presentation could represent an opportunity for those who were not familiar with self-access learning to get acquainted with it, while for the ones who had already been using it to exchange ideas and expand their views.

## WHAT IS A SELF-STUDY CENTRE ?

First of all, I would like to explain that I have used the term SELF-STUDY CENTRE (SSC) because it is the one we use in Cultura Inglesa-Rio/Brasilia. Here it comprehends the library, the listening centre and what we used to call the self-access centre. However, in different places, people use different terms meaning the same thing. For instance, Eurocentres use the term "Multi-Media Learning Centre(MMLC)" other terms also used are: "Learning Centre" , "Open Learning Centre" and "Self-Access Centre". But as Glynn Jones from Eurocentres, London has mentioned "*it doesn't matter what you call it, it's what you do in it that counts !* "(Siqueira 1992)

The self-study centre, then, may be defined as a set of facilities (library, self-access material, listening centre, computers, lab, ...) which has as its main aim to give students the opportunity of learning independently of teaching. "*Students are able to choose and use self-access material on their own and the material gives them the facility to correct or assess their own performance.*" (SHEERIN:1989)



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## HELP, FUN & INDEPENDENCE

### HELP

The Self-Study Centre represents an opportunity to learn how to learn, by developing students' learning strategies. It may provide CONSOLIDATION of what is being studied; REVIEW of what has already been taught; ASSESSMENT of what was really acquired and REMEDIAL WORK if learners were not successful in their acquisition.

### FUN

Learners can have fun by doing different kinds of enjoyable activities. For instance, they can play GAMES; watch FILMS; listen to TAPES; read their favourite BOOKS, MAGAZINES and NEWSPAPERS. It is also a chance of meeting OTHER LEARNERS to study together. Moreover, it is a different experience because they choose what they want to do.

### INDEPENDENCE

Self-Access learning also means preparing learners to become autonomous. Learners are responsible for their own learning. Learning how to learn prepare them for the future when they will not be able to count on a teacher or a formal institution. Besides, the SSC respects learners differences: different personality, Study habits and different purposes for studying.

## PUZZLES

Some of the problems mentioned by students when I gave them the first questionnaire were:

. They are not used to this idea. Their schools do not have this kind of facility.
. Some of them had never been to a SSC or knew what it was.
. Some previous teachers not even mentioned the centre.
. Many students viewed the centre only as remedial work - for weak students.
. Some of them did not have time to use the centre during the day. As they studied at night when the centre is usually closed, they could not profit from the facility any way.
. They were not motivated. It is easier to be dependent.
. They did not know how to use the material.

In the workshops with teachers we analysed the problems in four different views: the teachers' , the students' , institutional and people responsible for preparing materials.

## ANALYSING THE PROBLEM

The main difficulty, I think, is the fact that learner-centred teaching is a pre-requisite for the use of SSC. That is, teachers and students will only accept the idea of self-access learning if they have already accept a change in their roles. Autonomy is not achieved immmediately - it takes time and it is a very complex process.

The fact that both learners and their teachers were not aware of the usefulness of SSCs was discussed in the workshops. Most of them know little about it. There are also many preconceived ideas (one of them is that SSCs are only for weak students). Moreover, learners suffer from lack guidance, motivation and time.

However, most of these problems were considered to be associated with traditional teaching and how learners see their roles in the process of learning.

## LEARNERS' DIFFICULTIES

For learners to become independent is not easy because they will have to leave their comfortable position of receivers of knowledge and be responsible for their learning.

Sheerin(1989) points out that "*it is much easier to be dependent and let someone else (i.e. the teacher) take the responsibility. This is the way most educational systems work and it is, therefore, what most students are used to. Cultural differences may also present serious problems. Independence is not a virtues in all cultures. Other qualities of respect, obedience, and self-effacement may be much more highly valued.*"(Sheerin 1989:7)

Besides, learners have to gradually get free from many assumptions and prejudices about language learning. Dickinson(1987:121) mentions some of them: "*there is one ideal method and that teachers possess it; that the learner's knowledge of the mother tongue is of no use to him for learning a foreign language; that his knowledge of and experience of learning other subjects are not useful in language learning; that he is not capable of making any valid assessment of his performance, and so on.*"

## TEACHERS' DIFFICULTIES

As far as teachers are concerned, the main problem mentioned in the workshops was lack of awareness. Some of them do not understand what a SSC is or how it could be used. There are also those teachers who know what it is, but who do not believe that it may be helpful in any way. Furthermore, training learners to use the centre may represent an extra burden, which some of them do not consider part of their jobs. These points made by these teachers may represent not only lack of awareness of the functions of the centre, but also difficulty in accepting a new role for their students.

Sheerin(1989) explains that these difficulties lie in the way "*most teachers have been trained and gained their experience in the traditional mode. A change in role from `parent´ to `equal´ necessitates a change in attitude which can be traumatic. Teachers can find, it they are honest with themselves, that they need their students to need them. They may complain about having to chase this student for his or her homework or about having to chivvy that student to arrive punctually, but in reality they can be hooked on this parent-type role. It may be a fundamental part of their self-image, their `raison d´etre´.*" (Sheerin 1989:7)

Dickinson (1987) also stresses the importance of psychological and methodological preparation of teachers this new reality. "*Some teachers may need to be pesuaded that self-instruction is a viable mode. Some may be weaned away from the same kinds of false assumptions and prejudices which beset many learners. Teachers may also need to build their confidence that learners are capable to undertaking a great deal of responsibility for their own learning....*"(Dickinson 1987:121)

It is important to make it clear to teachers that they are not going to "lose their jobs" if learners become independent. In fact, one of our roles is to make learners autonomous. As they will not count on us forever, and we have to give them tools to survive by themselves.

## SOME SUGGESTIONS

It was mentioned in the workshops that teachers should be motivated. The institution they work for should help them understand the importance of the centre; and should also pay for extra hours of work, if necessary. The importance of constant support and involvement was emphasized. It was suggested that a special interest group could be formed.

As for learners, all the groups agreed that their motivation depend upon their teachers. They should be familiarized with the materials and with the idea. It was pointed out that it is very important to make people aware the the SSC is not a passing fad. Therefore, constant training and development of teachers and learners is a must.

We also discussed the importance of the managering of the centres and the production of material

## MY EXPERIENCE

I have been trying to encourage my students to use the SSCs by :

.Taking them to the centre
.Showing them how materials are classified and stored
.Giving them tasks
.Bringing self-access material to the classroom
.Promoting activities which can arouse their curiosity
.Using contracts and special forms

As far as my colleagues are concerned, I have tried to motivate them through:

.Workshops presenting the importance of self-access learning
.Poster sessions (e.g.TESOL-93)
.The same kind of activity I use with students.
.Inviting them to visit the centres and showing that there are useful material for them there.
.Promoting campaigns and competitions involving the whole school.

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